With Nixon on the Coast: The Lighter Side

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LAGUNA BEACH, Calif., Aug. 31—It was like a scene from the late night mystery shows that dominate the television screens of Southern California. There in the middle of the busy southbound three-lane artery of the San Diego Freeway at midafternoon was the President of the United States.

The Talk of the Western White House

For most people the only reason for even getting on that frantic thoroughfare is to ge where they are going, whether it is to Mexico to buy cheap meat or to the factories and resorts strung along the coast.

For the President, it was an afternoon drive. No one has ever made it clear why Mr. Nixon likes to ride on the freeways. But he had made it very clear that day that he did not want to be pursued by the press.

Immediately behind the limousine was a Secret Service car. A few hundred yards back were two more Secret Service cars and behind them a car carrying wire service reporters and photographers who had joined the motorcade as soon as they spotted the President leaving his private compound.

Press Car Blocked

The motorcade was proceeding at moderate speed, and the Secret Service cars made no attempt to keep the routine traffic from passing the President. But the last two Secret Service cars kept falling back, blocking the press car whenever it tried to pass in either the right or the left lane.

At one point the press car was slowed to 25 miles an hour as the President's car cruised on in the center of the great southward dash of ordinary Americans.

Later, off the freeway, the getaway from the press was much simpler. The last official car simply blocked the intersection until the President was out of sight.

The contest on the highways was one of the less important incidents that marked Mr. Nixon's 11-day stay at his Western White House in San Clemente, which ended, rather mercifully, some thought, on Friday, when the Presidential party and its large entourage departed for Washington and Camp David, Md. If the happenings seemed strange and a little erratic, as viewed from the underside, perhaps it was a result of the Presidency's being under siege in a very small place.

Of all the myths that have grown up around the modern presidency, none is more persistent than that the President, whether on vacation or in a grave crisis, spends virtually all his working hours at work on the affairs of state.

No Lazing or Grumping

It is particularly persistent when imagery is thought of as more important than substance.

Thus the President cannot be depicted as lazing around with his family in the dog days of August, when nothing much is happening anywhere. Nor can he be pictured as sitting around with his staff grumping about the bad fortunes of his Administration and figuring out ways to escape from the plagues of Watergate or from Vice President Agnew's troubles.

If a President who delegates much detail work, as Mr. Nixon does, did not do such things, he would not seem very human or normal.

Yet day in and day out, Mr. Nixon was depicted by his spokesmen as having worked routinely in his office in the compound on domestic or foreign affairs, casting the image of an unruffled and undeterred President.

One day at a news briefing, a particularly persistent reporter kept asking Gerald L. Warren, the press spokesman, specifically what the President had worked on. What precisely had he done that morning? He had met with Ronald L. Ziegler, his press secretary, who no longer briefs the press, and Gen. Alexander M. Haig Jr., his chief of staff.

A Live Missile

What had they done? Well, for one thing they discussed Administration policies bearing on the state of the economy. With Mr. Ziegler, who knows advertising and salesmanship, and Mr. Haig, a former military man? Where were his economic advisers? That was not made clear, but Mr. Warren, once again, scored on imagery.

One day some swimmers found a live missile in the water a few yards offshore from the Surf and Sand Motel, where the White House press corps was quartered. Some Air Force men came out, dragged it ashore, disarmed it and speculated that it must have been dropped by mistake from an Air Force training plane.

The incident rated three paragraphs in The Los Angeles Times but inspired endless jokes in the bar where reporters and some White House staff members hang out. After all, everyone knows who the Commander in Chief of the Air Force is and how he feels about the press.

"We are going to have some P.R. [press relations]," said Ken W. Clawson with determination as he arrived from Washington with some order or mandate to help move the White House out of the Watergate blues.

A Party

When he was with The Washington Post, Mr. Clawson was known as an able, hard-nosed reporter. As a member of the White House public relations complex he has been a hard-nosed Nixon booster.

Mr. Clawson's job in San Clemente was to open up the Presidential compound, as far as staff members were concerned, to the media so that the Administration would be depicted as moving ahead in a number of areas of Government, no longer crippled by Watergate. Mr. Clawson suggested that someone hold a cocktail party for the press and senior staff.

It was held on a patio of one of the buildings on Coast Guard property adjacent to the President's house. It was Mexicali style, complete with a Mexican combo, Margaritas and hor d'oeurves that burned the throat. Neither the President nor members of his family were there, but most of the senior staff was. Rose Mary Woods, the President's personal secretary, did a nice tango.

Some of the barriers fell. A few days later, General Haig was holding forth with a group of reporters in his office when Henry A. Kissinger burst in unannounced and exclaimed:

"Aha! I knew from the sweet tones of you boys you either had a lady or reporters in here."